

For New Speakers

So, you have been asked to speak as a sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous. Congratulations! You've seen it done a hundred times, but how do you get up there to deliver a message of your experience, strength, and hope.

This is simply one member's attempt to share Experience, Strength, and Hope with someone else, regardless of how many listeners he or she may have. A member speaking for the first time, or who wants to reexamine how they present their story when they speak to a group, might benefit from a few words from those with previous experience.

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

First, introduce yourself. You may choose to say your first name or your full name. Give your sobriety date and the information for your Home Group.

In the Big Book ("Alcoholics Anonymous"), we are told that we are to carry the message and a speaker needs to be clear on what his/her message is. In its simplest form, that message will be "This works."

Your talk should be broken into the three basic phases; "What it was like...", "What Happened...", and "What it is Like Now." It is not the purpose of your talk to explain everything – you won't be able to do that. But you will take some key moments from your story to share. This will include the items under the "What it was like...", "What Happened...", and "What it is Like Now." You may

want to mention if you have had previous bouts of sobriety.

PREPARATION

You really do not need to write a script for everything you are going to say. A simple list of words will remind you what you want to say and in some approximate order that makes sense to you. You will have this list to remind you what you want to say, and then be able to tell that part of your story like you were telling the story to some friends.

Because, you are.

Many speakers do a short prayer before they talk, sometimes alone in the bathroom or a quiet place, sometimes at the beginning of their talk. The best public prayer I have heard is a variation on Fr. Mychal's Prayer.

*"God, take away everything
I think I know about you,
and take away everything
I think I know about me
And teach me."*

LANGUAGE

The book says "We will tell, in our own words..." and no one can tell you what you cannot say. Well, some may try, but their authority is to tell you what they have done, not their theories on forbidden language.

But in the Raleigh area there is a sign some meetings use, "A lack of profanity offends no one."

My language was rough when I arrived in the south. And my story included a lot of the language I used in the streets. After a talk where my sponsor's wife had brought a friend to hear what I had to say, she could only remember that I had used the Queen-Mother of swear words in my talk. My sponsor's wife came up to me to suggest I watch my language.

So I became righteous and brought up the direction from the book, "We will tell, in our own words..." She agreed. "It also says you are to carry the message, and people won't hear the message if you are offending them."

At first I wanted to justify my language but realized that speaking was not about me and how wonderful I was. I was told to carry the message and voluntarily began restricting my language. The result was a better talk about the Program and what it has given me.

You have to make up your own mind.

WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?

First, remember who you are talking to. A room full of alcoholics are going to be far too self-involved to bother noticing much of what you are saying. In fact, there may be only a small number of people who are really listening – and you will never know who that is. You may be fooled that the folks who are sitting in the front, bright-eyed and apparently paying attention, are the people who will really get your message.

But don't be too sure of that. Sometimes you may plant a seed that won't take root for months or years, but something from your story may sink in with someone who is new, or who has been around for a while, secretly suffering and ready to try something desperate – like using someone else's story to apply our Program to their own life.

GET SOBER QUICKLY

Many speakers take the opportunity to tell war stories, and some of the things we have done are exactly what give us the authority of experience.

But some never leave the "and I go so drunk that I..." phase - you risk the newcomer leaving the meeting wondering if you ever got sober.

Whatever the length of time you have to talk, we offer this guideline

Try to keep your personal drunk-a-log down to 1/3 of the available time. "We will tell you what we were like..." does not mean talk about your career as a budding alcoholic all night. So, if you are speaking for 45 minutes, no more than 15 minutes for your drunk stories. With 30 minutes, you need no more than 10 minutes of drunk stories.

THE BEGINNING OF YOUR OWN SOBRIETY

The "What happened..." phase of your talk should run no more than 1/3 of the total time, but may be less if you hit a solid bottom and only had to have one sobriety date. With more than one sobriety date you may want to share on why you had to change your date.

BENEFITS

Sometimes a speaker will only talk about the struggles he/she must face in sobriety. Many of us have to share that we are not examples of success with jobs or relationship or behavior.

But never forget that you are talking to a room full of people who already know how to suffer.

Talk about your story in Recovery. Share how you worked your Steps, tell your Home Group, your Sponsor, your Inventory, and Step Work. Share the personal pain that finally gave you the desire to stop drinking. Really!

Your honesty will reach your audience. To stand there and visibly be better than the drunk you are describing will carry a message.

Do not share on Steps or problems you have not had. No one needs more theory. You are there to carry the message of how the actions you have taken – how using the Big Book, the Steps, your Sponsor, and the other tools – have taken you to this new place in your life.

Do not be afraid to share your real past, but do not involve the names or positions of other people in your story by name. You are telling your story, not theirs.

If you have a secret you learned to give up, you are not required to tell that secret from the podium. No one can make that decision but you. If you can share a past secret, it may carry a stronger message to someone in your audience who may need to hear how you found freedom from the poison of secrets.

Tell them how the Program has given what nothing else has. Talk about feeling at peace inside your own skin. Share healing you have experienced, changes in your relationships (family, friends, or work) or health.

Avoid presenting your story so that getting a new car, a new job, or more money as the reward of working your Program. People can become confused with the benefits of the program and material things. Your job is to share your message, your recovery, offer a solution, and “the” result of our Program.

“Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps...”

Step 10

Above all, talk of your hope and belief that the Program succeeded where nothing else could. Share your sense that you felt it would not work for you but that it brought you to where you are now and your hope for the future.

TOOLS STEPS AND SERVICE

Try to include how you have used the Steps and Tools of the Program (meetings, fellowship, literature, sponsor, etc.):

- *Meetings*
- *Fellowship*
- *Sponsorship*
- *Phone*
- *Literature*
- *Writing*

• *Steps and Steps and Steps*

Talk about Service and how it has affected your recovery. Keep it within your own experience and tell how you have done service. This can include carrying meetings into institutions, setting up for meetings, giving rides, talking with newcomers, making and receiving phone calls,

AFTERWARDS

If people come up to thank you, say “Thank you.” It is not your job to explain to them why they are wrong, just say “Thank you.”

If they say they got something from your talk, they might know better than you what is in their own head.

THE THREE TALKS

Almost all speakers say they had three talks:

- *The talk they planned and rehearsed to whatever level – **the talk they wanted to give;***
- *The talk they actually gave;*
- *The talk based on things they remembered after the meeting – what they think **they should have said.***

That is common. Like life, you do as well as you can and do it a little bit better next time. Do your best and learn. You can do it better the next time.

EMPTYING YOUR CUP

There is an old teaching story of a petitioner coming to see a monk for wisdom. The monk offered him a cup of tea and the petitioner held out a cup. The monk poured until the cup was full, then kept pouring until the cup overflowed and the tea spilled all over the floor.

When the teapot was empty, the monk shook his head and looked at the petitioner. He said:

“How can I give you any tea if you do not give me an empty cup?”

Speaking is your opportunity to empty your cup to get the next blessing or lesson.

A LIST

You may want to use an index card or a sheet of note paper to help you, should your mind go blank looking at the faces staring at you.

It can be very simple, just a few one or three word cues to remind you of what you intended to say.

Here is a sample of how one speaker might make such a list:

- Sobriety Date
- Home Group
- Mama dies
- Always the 'new' kid
- Confusion - my drinking problem separate from my dad's
- First AA meetings - uplifting stories
- Weak sponsors
- Two phony inventories, drank
- Rape and powerlessness
- Day 1
- Real Sponsor
- Real Inventory
- Going to Prisons
- Service
- Heart Surgery
- diabetes
- Losing Norma
- Today